

Press Conference
Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick
American Embassy
Tunis, Tunisia
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(begin transcript)

Deputy Secretary Zoellick: Well, thank you very much. This has been a short visit, but I very much appreciate the time that the senior officials and others have given me and my colleagues.

I began this trip a couple days ago in London and then had a brief time in The Hague in the Netherlands, and I'm going on this afternoon to the World Economic Forum meeting in Egypt, so it provided me an opportunity to call on colleagues in Tunisia as well.

I had an opportunity to meet Defense Minister Morjane last month in Washington. We had a good discussion on Tunisia, and he suggested that I visit. So, this has provided me an opportunity to listen and to learn.

I certainly know well of Tunisia's rich history and cultural legacy. So, I was also delighted this morning that I had a brief opportunity to visit Carthage. And, yesterday I had an opportunity to visit the American WWII cemetery. And, I'd like to thank all the people of Tunisia who are so warm in terms of taking care of that final resting place.

This morning, I had an opportunity to meet President Ben Ali who was very gracious with his time. Yesterday, I had a long session with Foreign Minister Abdallah and a number of his colleagues. And, I was pleased yesterday evening to have a chance to meet Development Minister Jouini who I consider a friend with whom I signed a trade and investment framework agreement when I was the U.S. Trade Minister. And, with Minister Jouini I had a chance to catch up on the development plans of Tunisia and we exchanged some ideas about the world economy and how the United States may be able to be of assistance. With the President and Minister Abdallah we discussed both bilateral and regional issues. On the bilateral agenda we covered economic, political, and security topics. I also spoke to both the President and the Minister about the work that we and others have been doing to try to bring peace to Darfur and Sudan and urged Tunisia to try to help us as a member of both the Arab League and African Union. And, we also discussed developments in the Maghreb, in the broader Middle East, and in Iraq.

Yesterday, I also had the opportunity to meet some members of civil society, NGO leaders. And I appreciate the time that they took to help me understand conditions in Tunisia. Part of our discussion connected very well with my discussion with the President and the Minister because I was able to observe that social development and educational development in Tunisia had certainly been able to reach broad segments of the society, has increased the university population significantly, and that is quite an accomplishment in comparison with other developing countries. But it also enabled me to suggest to the government officials that a more educated society with a larger middle class will inevitably seek more outlets for expression, assembly, and press freedom. Of course the greatest natural resource of Tunisia is its people. So, we hope to expand both our economic and political dialogues with the government, to learn more about the process of economic and political reform in Tunisia, and to see how we might assist. And finally, I'd just like to thank the people of Tunisia because, while I've only been here briefly, everyone has been exceptionally gracious. But then again, I hadn't yet met the press. (laughter) So, I'm happy to take your questions. Please.

Question: (translated from Arabic) This visit here coincides with very major events in the world. First of all, there's the visit by the Mauritanian president to Tunisia and also the position declared by the United States that recognizes the military regime in Mauritania. It also comes at a time when the United States has decided to resume full diplomatic relations with Libya. So I have three questions actually.

Zoellick: Three? (laughter)

Question: One, have you met any of the Mauritanian officials in Tunisia? Second, what is your opinion on this situation in Mauritania? And third, how would you react to the opinion that now says that your resuming full relations with Libya is a blow to civil society movement in Libya?

Zoellick: The answer to the first question of whether I've met Mauritanian officials is no. Although, when I went on my morning run, I think I passed the guest house where they were staying. So, I may have met some of their guards. (laughter) Second, as for the development, it's my understanding that the new government of Mauritania has pledged to implement an election process. So, we have been working with our partners in the African Union and Arab League to assure that that is a peaceful and effective transition. And then, your third question pertains to Libya. When the United States or another country establishes or reestablishes diplomatic relations it doesn't mean that there aren't difficulties in the relationship. But in this case, what it reflects is that the Libyan regime has made some very serious and positive choices. As you know it had been developing a nuclear weapons program. And we hope it's a very constructive sign to others in the world that Libya decided not to proceed down the course of developing nuclear weapons. The Libyan government has also renounced terrorism. And it's made various settlements for past actions. I've been urging the Libyan government to help us deal with the problems in Sudan and Darfur as well as in Chad. So, based on that progress we decided to reestablish diplomatic relations. But part of our diplomatic relationship will be to continue to raise the differences that we have whether on political or other issues. If people have started to take a positive direction, it's often useful to talk with them about it. And this links to a broader point that I discussed with some of my Tunisian colleagues. I hope there's an increasing opportunity to broaden the economic development process throughout the Maghreb. Morocco and Tunisia have been good partners and good friends of the United States. Algeria has just gone through a terrible decade of violence, but it too is now starting to follow a reform path. And now Libya is showing the signs of change, and we thank our Tunisian friends for their help on that issue. So these are some of the broader winds of change that I'll be discussing at the World Economic Forum in Egypt over the next couple of days. So, of course, we recognize that each country has its own history and special circumstance. But, if there are ways that we can help broaden regional cooperation and extend that to the work with the United States, we will look for means to do so.

Question: (translated from Arabic) If the situation in Tunisia is right, and it's good, there is development, infrastructure, there is an educated population, why wouldn't you take the further step to having a free trade zone signed with Tunisia. You know, just like what has happened with Morocco and Jordan.

Zoellick: When people use the term "free trade agreement," they are often covering a variety of different types of economic partnership. When the U.S. does free trade agreements they are particularly comprehensive in the scope of their coverage. And countries often have to lay the foundation for dealing with issues like investment and intellectual property and services that some countries don't even include in their agreements. And that's one reason why I signed a

trade investment framework agreement with Tunisia, I believe in 2004, if I recall. And we've established working groups that cover those three topics that I mentioned as well as some others. And that's one of the topics that I discussed with Minister Jouini is that, how to try to make sure we keep making progress on those topics and do so in concert with our business communities as well. When President Bush announced his initiative for a Middle East free trade area, he recognized that countries are going to be at different stages and you need to customize. For example, to reference the point I just made about the Maghreb, Tunisia's neighbor Algeria is not yet even a member of the WTO, so we're working with them on their accession to the WTO. But in addition, as we try to broaden our economic and political partnership, these are elements that are perhaps a pathway for the societies developing closer relationships. And, one of the points I discussed with the President and the Ministers was the obvious interconnection in the larger world between economic and political reforms. When I just travel around Tunis, I can see the satellite disks and I know that there's much more information coming in, you've got a larger educated population expanding the service industries. These people will also want to have a say in their country's future. And I was pleased with my discussion with Minister Jouini to learn about the consultative process that they had developed for the input to Tunisia's ten-year development plan. And perhaps mechanisms like that might also be used as they have in other countries to broaden the political and social input into the system. These are, of course, decisions for Tunisians to make. But, as a friend of Tunisia, we can share some of our experience from around the world.

Question: (translated from Arabic) Now, the United States looks upon Egypt and Tunisia as allies. However, there's much criticism that is leveled at these regimes. There are trials for judges, people from newspapers, journalists, also lawyers. So it seems that there's much tension in these countries. So many people would tend to accuse you of having sort of a double standard to deal with these regimes and that you're basing your contacts with them and your relations with them on interest, not on promoting democracy.

Zoellick: I don't know why one would suggest there is a double standard. With both countries we recognize that they're good partners. Of course we share interests in security and economic terms. But, we're also not shy about expressing our views on the need for additional political reforms. Now in doing so, one has to recognize that each country's circumstances are special. And I, having traveled around the world and visited all the continents, certainly recognize that we in the United States have a lot to learn and to listen from others around the world. That's one reason I came. But, at the same time, I think we can share with our friends our views on the fact that the changes that are taking place, not only within countries but within the region and the world at large, would suggest the need to be alert to the calls for reform.

Let's take a word on Egypt first. President Mubarak set out an agenda that he believed was important to Egyptians' political change. We're simply encouraging him to follow that agenda. Now sometimes the Egyptians say they can't open up because they're afraid of radical Islam. We don't mean to minimize these issues. We recognize there are serious questions. But at the same time, the point that I make in all the countries is that if you don't create a legitimate opportunity for opposition and assembly and participation, it may drive people to more extreme forms which would be bad for everyone. But, as President Bush said in his second inaugural, countries will find their own way, in their own course, based on their own background. But we will look for ways to assist. Perhaps because I bring a global perspective to this, let me just indulge in a brief story. In 1980, I was teaching in Hong Kong on a fellowship. And my Chinese students were all excited about the rise of Deng Xiao Peng and his reforms. When I talked about democracy, they said democracy doesn't fit Asia. It only exists in Japan in some odd form. I look back 26 years later and I see democracy in Korea. I see democracy in Taiwan. I see democracy in Indonesia,

the largest Muslim country in the world. I see democracy struggling in Thailand, in Malaysia, in the Philippines. So, I do not believe any region is foreign to the spirit of democracy. But it may take time, and we want to try to help countries that do this in a positive way. I'll add there used to be a view in Asia that because of Confucianism Asia could not develop economically. That forecast didn't turn out so well. So let me emphasize, I have, as I've mentioned, followed Tunisia's development for many decades since I was a young student and did a paper on it. It's a great country and there's been great accomplishments. You can sense a spirit of tolerance and modernity here just even in the brief time I've been. So, we simply want to encourage the people of Tunisia and the government of Tunisia to continue that reform path. And our point is not to be critical, it's to help.

Has a woman asked a question? No? You don't have to, it's ok. Yes?

Question: (translated from Arabic) I have two questions. You have been involved in the negotiations in Darfur, and I'd like to ask you a question on the prospects after the signing of the agreement there in Darfur and also on the composition of the peacekeeping forces or the forces that will be in charge of the peacekeeping operations there. I have a second question here, the Minister of Defense said to the congress that he didn't know when the American forces will pull out from Iraq. Could you tell us the logic of continuing to stay there?

Zoellick: First on Darfur. The peace agreement that was reached in Abuja with the strong leadership of President Obasanjo of Nigeria is a vital opening. But, the situation is fragile and there's important work to do to capture the momentum. We need to get more food into the two-million people in camps, and my government has started a process that seems to be increasing the rations. We need to strengthen the African Union force on the ground, the seven thousand or so soldiers and police because they have a vital role to play in implementation. Just this week the African Union and the UN Security Council took additional steps to move in a UN peacekeeping force. Because this is an area the size of France and you need more people and more help. As I understood it, part of your question was asking about the composition of that force. It would start with the African Union component. But, then I think, it would be most effective to draw other participants from Asia, South Asia, perhaps some of the other Arab and African countries. And that's one of the questions that I raised with President Ben Ali and Foreign Minister Abdallah is the possibility of whether Tunisia might be of help. And I realize it's very early in the process, but the President gave me a response that I thought was encouraging in Tunisia examining it given its history in peacekeeping missions. But the key is also the role played by the rebel movements and the government. We need to support the rebel movements who've taken the courageous decision for peace and encourage others to join that process. And we need to encourage the government of Sudan to seize this opportunity to help millions of its own people, but also create a different political context in Sudan, both in the south, Darfur, and in the east, which can be very important in helping Sudan regain its place in the international community.

Now, your second question was about Iraq and the presence of coalition forces. Let's start by recognizing we're at a very important juncture in Iraqi history. You've had a number of free elections; you've developed a constitution; and now we're at the critical point of forming a government that moves from the transition phase to longer term service. And, the Prime Minister is just in the final phases of putting together his cabinet. Given my answer to one of your colleague's questions you see this is no small achievement in a country that was pulverized by Saddam Hussein for some twenty years and prior to that lived under a dynasty. You finally have a chance for people to determine their own future. Now, of course they face terrible challenges. Including the splits among the various parties in the society. But it's worth noting the people of Iraq have decided to create a unity government to represent all those different groups. And then

that brings us to the question of the coalition forces. The primary reason that we're staying is because the people want us to stay. It's interesting even some of the Sunni groups that over the past couple years were most ardent in resistance recognize that the coalition forces are important in trying to go after terrorists, kill insurgents and try to maintain some peace. But we're not eager to stay longer than necessary. And that's why President Bush has said that our departure will be based on the conditions on the ground. And a key part of that is obviously training a new Iraqi army, which has made good progress over the past year. The creation of a new Iraqi police force is probably about 12 months behind, but it is also making some progress. So we'll work with the new democratically elected government of Iraq to determine how to deal with the security challenges--one of which all parties have identified is the various militias. But I visited Iraq a number of times myself, and I'll just say the quality of the people I've met from the various communities is extraordinarily impressive. I can even see some rough parallels in Tunisia because you had a more educated group of people; you had a higher stage of economic development, but frankly it suffered very badly over the past decades. So, I think if we and others help these people succeed, and one key step will be taking the new government and supporting it with a broader international partnership, that they can do so. But, it won't be easy. Because, look, there's people that don't want democracy to succeed. They want to return to the age of the Caliphate. I don't think that's what most of the people of Iraq want.

I'm sorry that I have to end. You have lots of good questions. But I've got to catch a plane.

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